

Caring for Foster Rats

Setting Up for Your Foster Rat:

It is best to house rats in a wire cage with bar spacing that is small enough to prevent escape. Rats require a good size cage to live in, with multiple levels to climb. We recommend a minimum of 2'x2'x2' for one or two rats. Rats love to climb and explore, so two or three levels in the cage will be important as well. Just ensure that the flooring and ramps of the cage are not wire mesh, which can catch on a rat's toes and limbs or cause other injury. Opt instead for a cage with solid metal or plastic flooring and ramps.

We do not recommend housing your rat in a glass aquarium or plastic "habitrail," as these do not offer proper ventilation and, especially with habitrails, are often too small for a rat, difficult to properly clean, and can be chewed through.

The best way to set up a rat cage is to put down a layer of newspaper, blanketing, or other bedding on the bottom of the cage, and then add shredded paper, commercial small animal bedding, timothy hay, and other fun materials. NEVER use cedar shavings because they can cause liver disease and respiratory problems in any small mammals. Pine shavings can also contain a high amount of oils that can cause skin problems. It is best to avoid any wood shavings.

Basic Rat Information:

Rats are very intelligent and very friendly animals. Many people are afraid of rats because their portrayal in the media, and association with poverty, decay, and disease. However, domestic rats are smart, clean, friendly, and very social. Rats interact beautifully with people. They often love to be held, petted, and snuggled. Rats can have a great deal of fun climbing up on people's shoulders and arms, and can be trained to do a variety of behaviors. If you are looking for a small mammal that will want to spend time with you, rats make a wonderful choice. Rats are also very social with each other, and love to live in groups! Just make sure they are all the same sex to avoid creating more baby rats in need of homes. Rats should be handled and allowed e and mental stimulation for at least 30 minutes a day.

Rat Tidbits!

- Rat's tails keep them cool! Rats expand and contract the blood vessels in their tail to help regulate their body temperature!
- A group of rats is called a mischief!
- Rats can laugh! Rats make chattering and grinding noises when they are happy and content.

Teeth & Nail Care:

As rodents, rats have teeth that grow continuously, so it is important to offer wooden blocks and branches and other options for your rat to chew and wear down its teeth. Nail trims may also sometimes be necessary, and it can help to put a flat stone or patch of sandpaper in part of the cage to help keep their nails short naturally.



Diet:

- The best food for your rat is “rat blocks” or another commercial pellet diet designed for rats. These diets are good because your rat will get 100% nutrition with every bite that it takes, as opposed to picking and choosing what they want to eat if you offer a dried seed and fruit mix. This helps prevent nutrient deficiencies, obesity, and skin conditions. Make sure your rat always has access to fresh, clean water. This can be offered in either a bowl or bottle; if you use a bottle just ensure that your rat knows how to use it and is drinking consistently.
- It is important to also offer fresh fruits and vegetables to your rat. Some good treats are tomatoes, strawberries, apples, bananas, pear, peach, melon, papaya, mango, kiwi, pineapple, carrots, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, peppers, cucumber, zucchini, peas, cress, chicory, basil, sage, parsley, coriander, coarse cut oatmeal, and pumpkin seeds. Rats are omnivores, so they can also eat occasional high protein, healthy treats like boiled or scrambled egg, mealworms, lean meat, lentils, beans, peas or chickpeas! Keep an eye out for any food stashes your rat might hide around the cage that may go bad.
- Rats CANNOT have grapes, raisins, rhubarb, walnuts, lettuce, or citrus fruits, as these can be toxic to rats.

Enrichment :

- Rats like to make nests to sleep in, so you should provide many different textures for your rat to nest in. Rats like to sleep in hay, shredded paper, tissues, paper towels, cotton balls and ripped up pieces of cloth. You can also make or buy beds and hammocks, and even use pillowcases, blankets, and towels for them to snuggle in.
- It is also important to add houses for the rat to hide and build nests inside. Some good houses are shoeboxes, wooden boxes, empty oatmeal containers, hollow dried coconuts, and empty tissue boxes. Wood and wicker can also be good materials, provided they are untreated with dyes, glues, or chemicals. Oak, cherry, and apple are all good woods to use. They will chew on these for fun as well, which helps them keep their ever growing teeth from becoming too long.
- Many of these same items can be used as toys for rats. Toys are a fun and important source of enrichment to keep your rat sufficiently mentally stimulated. A great way to do this is to offer a rotating variety of toys, chewing materials, and nesting materials. One especially entertaining type of enrichment is to encourage foraging by making or offering treats and food in toys that make the rat work to get the food out. For example, you can close food inside of a cardboard tube, or put it inside a ball or box with holes so as the rat pushes it the food will fall out.
- Rats are smart, and can often be trained to do a variety of tricks and behaviors in exchange for treats. They are also quite agile and acrobatic, and may use a rope tied across the top of the cage as a tightrope, or other ladders, jumps, hoops, and mazes. Just make sure to supervise your foster rat when introducing new items to their space or having them outside of their enclosure so they are safe.

Housekeeping:

- Rats live for 2 to 3 years and do not require any inoculations from the vet, so the main way to keep them healthy is to keep their cage clean. Rats produce a lot of feces and urine so it is necessary to at least spot clean their cage every day, and fully empty and wash the cage with a mild cleanser at least weekly. Improper cleaning can cause medical problems for your rat.
- To gauge your pet's health, keep an eye on any signs of change. Look out for any itching, sneezing, wounds, lethargy, weight changes, and changes in eating, drinking, or elimination. Dull coat, runny eyes and nose, and waxy ears can also be signs of illness. When in doubt, reach out to a veterinarian.